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Predicting risk of entry into foster care from early childhood experiences: A survival analysis using LONGSCAN data

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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether a multi-domain model of maltreatment informed by an ecological framework—including factors related to the child, caregiver, family, neighborhood, and dimensions of maltreatment experience—predicted entry into foster care between the ages of 4 and 18 among children with no prior foster care experience. To determine which factors predict entry into foster care, secondary data analyses were conducted utilizing a sub-sample from LONGSCAN (Longitudinal Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect) of 942 children and their primary caregivers. Results demonstrate that there are important predictors for entry into out-of-home placement across multiple ecological domains. Characteristics related to child, caregiver, and family characteristics, and neighborhood context, as well as dimensions of maltreatment (particularly emotional maltreatment), predicted risk of placement in out-of-home care. Implications for child welfare practice are discussed. This examination of the effects of multiple ecological domains adds to our understanding of children's risk of removal and entry into out-of-home placement.

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Despite a significant decrease in the number of children entering foster care over the past decade, the number of children entering into out-of-home placement has remained high. A total of 254,904 children entered care in the United States between October 1, 2012 and September 30, 2013, and 402,378 children were in foster care at the end of September 2013 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Although the number of children in foster care in the U.S. has declined, a sizable proportion of children continue to experience foster care: it is estimated that 6% of U.S. children spend time in foster care between birth and age 18, with significantly higher rates for American Indian and Alaska Native (15% of children) and African American children (12%; Wildeman & Emanuel, 2014). Removal and placement of a child in out-of-home care is considered a traumatic event, over and above the impact of the experienced maltreatment that precipitated the removal event. There is a need to better understand the risk for removals and preventive interventions to decrease the likelihood of further trauma to the child as well as determine the appropriate course of action to ameliorate risk (Davidson-Arad, Englechin-Segal, & Wozner, 2003; Doyle, 2007).

Early research on factors related to risk of entry into foster care has focused on single-domain or two-domain models such as child characteristics; child characteristics and poverty; or child characteristics and caregiver characteristics; or family and neighborhood characteristics (for example, see Farmer, Mustillo, Burns, & Holden, 2008; Freisthler, Merritt, & LaScala, 2006; Horwitz, Hurlburt, Cohen, Zhang, & Landsverk, 2011; Lindsey, 1991; Thieman & Dail, 1997). The most frequently examined child characteristics are age and race/ethnicity; and the most frequently examined caregiver/family

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characteristics are marital status, education level, use of alcohol/drugs, or caregiver depression (e.g., Horwitz et al., 2011; Kimberlin, Anthony, & Austin, 2009; Rivaux et al., 2008). Examination of demographic characteristics often focuses on income level and family composition (Barth, Wildfire, & Green, 2006; Lindsey, 1994; Wulczyn, 2009). Although research on single-domain or two-domain out-of-home placement research is important and has informed our understanding of factors related to out-of-home placement, arguments have been made recently for the utilization of complex theoretical models in child welfare research to examine multiple aspects of child, family, context, and outcomes (Carnochan, Rizik-Baer, & Austin, 2013). Most notably, the ecological model of maltreatment developed by Bronfenbrenner and others over the past several decades is a comprehensive multi-level approach to aid our understanding of the complex, multi-level dynamics associated with child maltreatment (see Belsky, 1980, 1993; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Carnochan et al., 2013; Garbarino & Eckenrode, 1997; Wulczyn, Chen, & Courtney, 2010). The ecological model could be important in improving our understanding of factors that predict the removal of a child from parental custody once maltreatment has occurred.

Recently, in part inspired by these ecological models, recommendations for multi-domain predictor models for entry into out-of-home care have emerged (Carnochan et al., 2013). Multi-domain predictor models, which examine the relation between predictors and outcomes at more than one level (e.g., not just examining child characteristics, but examining child, family, and community characteristics simultaneously as predictors), have been produced for both maltreatment recidivism and factors associated with placement. Multi-domain models of recidivism are relevant to the understanding of risk for out-of-home placement, because prior history is a risk factor for later placement of children who are not placed during initial investigation (DePanfilis & Zuravin, 2002; Drake, Jonson-Reid, & Sapokaite, 2006; English, Marshall, Brummel, & Orme, 1999; Horwitz et al., 2011). Further, while many maltreating parents are never reported (Wildeman et al., 2014), those who do come to the attention of the child welfare system may face closer scrutiny (Center for Community Partnerships in Child Welfare of the Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2006).

Multi-domain models predicting maltreatment and/or placement most often include two domains such as child and neighborhood characteristics (Wulczyn, 2009) or caregiver and neighborhood characteristics (Thieman & Dail, 1997). Recent examples of models including several domains include: Dubowitz et al. (2011), Horwitz et al. (2011), and Thompson and Wiley (2009). Both Dubowitz et al. (2011) and Thompson and Wiley (2009) examined predictors of maltreatment from several domains, and Horwitz et al. examined multi-domain predictors for subsequent entry into placement after initial investigation. In the Dubowitz et al. study, factors in five domains—lower child cognitive development, lower maternal education (less than high school), maternal drug use, maternal depression, and larger family size—predicted greater likelihood of child maltreatment (that is, a Child Protective Services [CPS] report) among 224 children who were followed from approximately age two to age 12. In their sample of 149 children maltreated as infants, Thompson and Wiley (2009) examined child, parent, and socio-demographic factors, as well as aspects of the initial maltreatment; they found that the strongest predictors of re-referral during the 11–15 year follow-up were (1) initial type of maltreatment was physical or sexual abuse and (2) the initial maltreatment was substantiated. The Horwitz et al. study, using data from the National Survey on Child and Adolescent Well-being, examined child demographics, prior history, child functioning, violence exposure, and caregiver demographics related to age, family structure, parenting practices, and parental depression. While examining multiple factors, even this most recent study did not include factors across the ecology of maltreatment thought to be related to maltreatment (and consequently later placement) in the same model. Ecological theory suggests that factors related to the child, the caregiver, parent–child interaction, the family, the neighborhood context within which the family lives, and maltreatment are all domains of interest in prediction models. Taken together, these studies illustrate both the potential of applying a multi-domain ecological model in predicting placement, as well as the limitations in the work that has been done thus far.

In addition to using multi-domain models to examine predictors of entry into foster care, it would be helpful to incorporate a more sophisticated approach to understanding the dimensions of current or prior maltreatment into these prediction models. Most studies have examined maltreatment utilizing the three most commonly referred types of maltreatment, that is, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. We were unable to identify any studies that examine the impact of emotional maltreatment on entry into out-of-home placement, although research suggests that emotional maltreatment is an often-reported type of maltreatment for children involved in the child protection system (English, Thompson, White, & Wilson, 2015), and, although definitions vary, it is included in the national definition of maltreatment (Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 2010). Emotional maltreatment has been defined as a “repeated pattern of behavior that conveys to children that they are worthless, unloved, unwanted, only of value in meeting another’s needs, or seriously threatened with physical or psychological violence” (Hart, Brassard, & Karlson, 1996); or “psychological tactics aimed at undermining emotional security and sense of self that includes guilt induction, and exertion of power through psychologically coercive means” (Bornstein, 2006).

Furthermore, most studies examine maltreatment as an “incident” level variable, that is, maltreatment occurred (or did not), and then by single type—even though the data indicate that as many as one-third of children experience more than one type; in addition, most studies do not report on whether the child has experienced more than one incident of maltreatment and/or information on the severity of maltreatment (English, Upadhyaya, et al., 2005). Data from the LONGSCAN study allow these comparisons (English, Graham, Litrownik, Everson, & Bangdiwala, 2005).

Re-examining the factors that prior research suggests are likely to predict entry into out-of-home placement using a multi-dimensional longitudinal dataset provides a unique opportunity to address the question of multiple domain models as well as additional dimensions of maltreatment as predictors of out-of-home placement for children. LONGSCAN, a 20-year

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